

CHINESE CUSTOMS GOVERNING THE LIVES OF WOMEN AND THE RESULTANT EMERGENCE OF IMAGES OF WOMEN IN PEARL S. BUCK'S 'THE GOOD EARTH'

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ABSTRACT

The culture of any nation consisting traditions and customs form the civilization of any nation. The traditions of a nation influence the lives of men and women both and thereby the society. Chinese culture is an amalgamation of old world traditions and a westernized lifestyle. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have left a collective and lasting impression on Chinese culture and tradition. The subordination of women in society has been a common phenomenon in almost all societies. The rigid traditions and customs socially constructed force women to be locked in some boundaries. Many writers have given voice to the subjugation, oppression of women through literary works. Pearl S. Buck is also one of the prominent feminist writers who has brought out the varied images of Chinese women who were the victim of such rigid customs in her novels due to her experience of both American as well as Chinese cultures. She explores the position of women in Chinese patriarchal society in her major works – 'East wind: west wind', 'The Good Earth', 'The Mother', 'Peony', 'Pavilion of Women' etc.

The present paper aims to have a glimpse of rigid Chinese customs governing the lives of women and elaboration of it through the emergence of varied images of women during the first half of 20th C. especially in Pearl. S. Buck's 'The Good Earth'.

KEYWORDS: Confucianism, Foot Binding, Feminist Theory, Social Construction of Gender

INTRODUCTION

China has a land area of 3,691,502 square miles, making it the world's third largest nation. It borders thirteen countries. The Chinese refers to their country as the middle kingdom, an indication of how central they have felt themselves to be throughout history. There are cultural and linguistic variations in different regions but for such a large country, the culture is relatively uniform.

"It has been justly remarked that a nation's civilization may be estimated by the rank which females hold in society. If the civilization of China be judged of by this test, she is surely far from occupying that first place which she so strongly claims." (Chinese Repository, vol. 2 (Nov. 1833), p. 313) In semi colonial and semi feudal society which lasted for several millennia, Chinese women experienced a bitter history of prolonged oppression, degradation and abasement. Everything was formed around the family in traditional Chinese society. Women had to obey the dictates of their parents. They were expected to have blind obedience to the man of the household. They were secluded from the social and economic politics of China locked in the domestic sphere and were deprived of property and inheritance rights. There had been a great influence of Confucianism, an ethical and philosophical system developed from the teaching of Chinese Philosopher, Confucius from approximately 200 B.C.E to 1911 and by nationalist government from 1911 to 1949. It affects all the strata of Chinese society.

Pearl Sydenstricker Buck (1892-1973) is one of the renowned American writers. She enjoys both high acclaim and recognition from literary community and readers as well especially during the 1930's through the 1960's. Although American born, she spent her most of her life span in China. Her multiculturalism and personal experiences enabled her "to present to us China as the Chinese sees it, but in language which we can understand." (Bentley 1935, 793), serving as a bridge between the East and the West. In Majority of her novels having Chinese setting, she was successful enough in portraying the Chinese traditions and customs influenced by Confucianism and Feudalism through the large range of Chinese women characters.

This paper aims at describing the traditions and customs of Chinese society governing the lives of women during late 19th and early 20th C. I have taken Pearl S. Buck's bestselling novel 'The Good Earth' to elaborate the influence of these orthodox traditions on the major women characters of the novel such as O-lan, Wang Lung's aunt, Lotus, Cuckoo etc. and thus presenting the multifarious images of women in 'The Good Earth'.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To fulfill my objective, Qualitative research methods such as close reading, thematic analysis are employed. I have also used Feminist theory and Social Construction theory.

Chinese Traditions and Customs Governing the Lives of Women

Women in China was referred to as 'yin' as quoted in a famous traditional Chinese cosmology which literally means 'Overcast' or 'shade', often referred to the female, symbolized by the moon, standing for all things dark, secret, hidden, cold, weak and passive. The function of woman could be summed up in one four letter- 'obey'.

During Han dynasty (206 B.C.E – 219 B.C.E), woman's behaviour was governed by 'three obedience and four virtues'. Accordingly, a woman must obey her father as a daughter, obey her husband as a wife and obey her sons in widowhood. The four virtues include morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work. Women had been caged in some boundaries and also isolated them from the social and economic politics of China. The primary function of marriage was to produce male offspring to ensure the continuance of the family line. The wife was supposed to bear a son for the family within one year. If not she would lose favour and face humiliation. The husband would take another wife or a concubine and the most shocking is that his barren wife had to perform this task of finding a concubine. It was a common practice in wealthy families to keep multiple concubines or slaves for pleasure. And once a wife becomes a mother, her position changes and she enjoys a status much higher than that of a wife.

Female infanticide was also prevalent during that time in China. It is impossible to draw accurate picture of what happened to baby girls in China at any given time but it is certain that this form of discrimination was there against girls, carried out at birth or in early childhood using the technique such as drowning in baby ponds, immersion in cold or boiling waters, suffocation, burying alive. Girls were considered as commodity or bad investment. As the old Chinese saying, "A married daughter is like the water that is thrown out of the door." In poor family during some natural calamities such as famine, daughters were sold to wealthy people for their survival. From the very birth of a girl, she was brought up differently than boys.

Social phenomena are formed, institutionalized, known and made into tradition by humans. (List of Sociological theories, 2010). Likewise, the significance of Foot binding was communally agreed upon and made into tradition in Feudal

China. At the age of 3 to 4 years, a girl was made aware of women's place at home by the barbarous custom of Foot binding. This evil custom was begun into China in the 10th C. and continued into 1940's although officially banned in 1911. The intense pain and suffering caused by this custom can be summed as "for every pair of bound feet, a bucket of tears." The size of feet remained to be only 3 inches in length from heel to toe. The shocking objective of such a custom was to please her husband. It was difficult to marry for a woman whose feet were not bound.

When a girl reaches at the age of 14, she was secluded in women's apartment to learn the manners of womanliness. Men and women were supposed to follow 'filial piety'. Accordingly, women should be obedient to her husband as well as to her mother in law. As quoted in 'Classics for girls', young wife's priorities are:

"As a wife to husband's parents

You should be filial be and good...

Be submissive to their orders, all their wants anticipate,

Be submissive to your husband,

Nor his wishes e'er neglect,

First of all in this submission is his

Parents to respect."

Under feudalism, women's role was limited to domestic chores and working in the field. Woman's work was transforming into wealth for their husbands. Economically dependent, they were deprived of property and inheritance rights. They were dispossessed of all rights and had to obey the dictates of their parents. They were not allowed to remarry if their spouse died, being harnessed by system of polygamy and prostitution. It has been well established tradition that when the husband died, his wife also committed suicide as a demonstration of perfect loyalty and the conviction that it was better for a wife to go heaven with her husband than to live alone on earth. (C. K. Yang, op.cit, p.178)

Under such rigid customs, women's reliance shaped a societal attitude which overlooks violence against women. Women have only few roles to perform such as a wife, concubine, prostitute and a slave locked in domestic boundaries. As described in books such as 'Percepts for women' and 'Classics for Girls', women were instructed to be obedient, unassuming, yielding, timid, respectful, reticent and unselfish in character." (Croll, op. cit)

Mao Zedong considered four oppressions – political, clan, religious and masculine – to be four ropes of China's old Feudal patriarchal society shackling the Chinese women, especially those of peasants' origin.

Resultant Images of Women in Pearl S. Buck's Novel 'the Good Earth'

Buck is successful in bringing out the varied images of women in Chinese society during the first half of the 20th C. through the characters of O-lan, Lotus, Cuckoo, Wang Lung's Uncle's wife etc. Buck describes and explores the position of women in China and also the rigid customs in which women were locked.

We as Readers Come Across the Words of Great Lady at Hwang House about O-Lan

"O-lan came to Hwang House when she was 10 years old. She was bought by Hwang in a year of famine when her parents came south because they had nothing to eat."

So, from the very birth, O-lan has been the victim of slavery. As discussed before, daughters were deemed not more than commodity. They were sold by poor families to survive the family in natural calamities. Wealthy people bought the girls and kept them as a slave. In the same manner, O-lan was bought and used as a Kitchen slave at Hwang House.

On the very first day of her wedding, O-lan remained in the kitchen and prepared delicious dishes and served to the guests invited by Wang Lung to participate in his Wedding ceremony. Wang Lung's relatives, his friends and Wang Lung himself praised her for such delicious cooking. In reply to Wang Lung's praise, O-lan replied:

"I have been Kitchen slave since I went into the House of Hwang." (The Good Earth, P.)

In the same way, on New Year, O-lan proves herself as a good Kitchen slave by preparing such a delicious cake which only the rich ate at the feast. Wang Lung felt his heart fit to burst out with pride as there was no other woman in the village able to do so.

As we read the Great Lady's words when Wang Lung went there to take O-lan,

"Take her and use her well. She is a good slave, although somewhat slow and stupid; and does well what she is told; and also she has a good temper." (The Good Earth, p.13)

Berger and Luckmann (1991) view society as existing both as objective and subjective reality. The former is brought about through the interaction of people with the social world, with this social world in turn influencing people resulting in routinisation and habitualization. That is, any frequently repeated action becomes cast into a pattern, which can be reproduced without much effort. This is institutionalized by society to the extent that future generations experience this type of knowledge as objective. As Wang Lung's father cried out seeing Wang's mutinous face in the very first chapter of the novel 'The Good Earth':

"And what will we do with a pretty woman? We must have a woman who will tend the house and bear children as she works in the fields and will pretty women do these things." (The Good Earth, p.6)

Here, Wang Lung's father views women as 'Kitchen slave' and 'bearer of children'. It is the general tendency of Chinese society towards women. Such mindset becomes cast into pattern which is also inherited by Wang Lung from his father.

A Renowned Feminist Simone De Beauvoir Quotes in 'the Second Sex':

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman..... it is a civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine."

O-lan's personal experiences as a slave at Hwang House and the general social phenomena prevalent in Chinese society forced her to be submissive in every matter. When Wang Lung and O-lan came out of the house of Hwang House, O-lan tried to pick up the box and placed it on her shoulder as per the order of Wang Lung. When Wang Lung changed his mind and commands her to take the basket instead, she obeys him 'speechless'. As readers, we are shocked by O-lan's silence. Throughout the novel, O-lan does everything in a submissive ways, a virtue she was forced to adopt.

Girls were considered as a bad economic and emotional investment, particularly in poor families. The major duty of a woman after marriage was to produce male child. If she would not be able to do so, her position becomes insecure in the family. Wang Lung is also not exceptional. He believes that sons are more valuable than daughters. At the birth of the

first child, Wang Lung could not bear more and cried out impatiently forgetting O-lan, "is it a man? tell me at least this 'is it a man?'" When O-lan answers that it is a male child, Wang Lung and his father become overflowed with happiness. So, the birth of a male child was a big happiness in China during that time as it seen in some societies in India as well.

It was believed that the birth of a daughter brings evil in the family. It was the general phenomena that daughters do not belong to their families. At the birth of a fourth child when Wang Lung asked O-lan, "what now..." O-lan replied, it is over once more. It is only a slave this time – not worth mentioning." () Wang Lung became angry with the thought that a new more mouth to be fed. Another instance of female infanticide can be seen when O-lan gave birth to a child during famine. In reply to Wang Lung's question whether male or female, O-lan answered with a sigh that a child is dead. But when Wang Lung took the dead child to bury, he saw two dark, bruised spots on her neck. It directly means that O-lan had smothered the female child. This act of O-lan can't be justified on a moral ground but O-lan's personal experiences and social traditions forced her to commit such immoral act which denotes that there was a social precedent of killing female infants.

Selling of daughters was also common especially in poor families in adverse conditions as can be seen in case of O-lan. Wang Lung expressed his desire to go back to his land from south but he did not have enough coins to do so. At that time, O-lan instantly suggested to sell their daughter whom Wang Lung loves most. She said,

"If it were only I, she would be killed before she was sold.... The slave of slaves was I! But a dead girl brings nothing. I would sell this girl for you to take you back to the land." (The Good Earth, p.83)

O-lan's own suffering as a slave full of unbearable pains and rigid customs governing the lives of women in a patriarchal society where women especially those of slaves have no place in the society force her to utter such words. The social construction of gender and the social norms of Chinese society force the poor peasants to have such mindset regarding women. It was reflected in the conversation between Wang Lung and a man from his neighbouring hut in the south. That man's words prove the general notion towards girls:

"When the rich are too rich, there are ways and when the poor are too poor, there are ways. Last winter, we sold two girls and this winter if this one my woman bears a girl, we will sell again. One slave I have kept the first. The others it is better to sell than to kill although there are those who prefer to kill them before they drew breath." (The Good Earth, p.84)

Once the girls were sold as a slave, they become the property of wealthy people. Women as slaves suffered unbearable pains and they were mentally and physically tortured and exploited. When Wang Lung, thinking of selling his pretty fool asked O-lan, "This child of ours is a pretty maid, even now. Tell me, were the pretty slaves beaten also." (The Good Earth, p.96) O-lan having her bitter experience as a slave, shared him the pathetic condition of slaves in rich man's house. She said,

"Aye, beaten or carried to a man's bed, as the whim was and not to one man's only but to any that might desire her that night and the young lords bickered and bartered with each other for this slave or that...." (The Good Earth, p. 96)

When Wang Lung became a wealthy landlord, he had time to observe O-lan. Here Wang Lung's masculine mindset especially those of wealthy Chinese man is reflected. To him, O-lan is looking dull and common creature; her hair

rough and brown; her face flat and coarse skinned; her feet large and wide. Looking at her, he cried out, "Now anyone looking at you would say you were the wife of a common man and never of one who has land which he hires men to plow" (p.121). It makes it clear that Wang Lung becomes conscious of his masculinity when he becomes wealthy. As a matter of fact, we, the readers as well as Wang Lung himself knew that he reproaches the creature who through all those years had followed him faithfully as a dog. When he was poor, she left her bed even after a child was born and came to help him in the field. He also knew that it could have not be possible to be wealthy one for him if O-lan had not seized the handful of jewels from the rich man's house. So, O-lan gives her family self-sacrificing devotion and centers all her strength on day to day necessities but in reward she got nothing except repression, neglect, disloyalty, disappointment and emotional injury. O-lan stands for the dignity and courage of the marginalized wife.

As Foot binding was agreed upon as a tradition in China, Wang Lung also deemed it as a sign of beauty. He said to O-lan, "He saw with an instant disappointment that her feet were not bound." (The Good Earth, p. 26) O-lan replies in a submissive manner, "My mother did not bind them since I was sold so young. But the girl's feet, I will bind." (p.122) It clearly states that there has been a great influence of Chinese society on building Wang Lung's masculine traits. Pearl S. Buck takes a very objective neutral tone towards foot binding in 'The Good Earth' drawing attention to the cultural tendencies that might make a woman choose to do such a thing to her daughter. When O-lan binds her own daughter's feet, she is motivated by Wang Lung's rejection of her by his criticism of her 'large unbound feet' and by her desire for her daughter to have a happy marriage with a husband who loves her.

Wang Lung's attraction towards Lotus' tiny feet and fair skin is a social construct because women with bound feet and fair skin were considered beautiful in Feudal China. O-lan's submissiveness reaches at the climax level when Wang Lung brings Lotus, a woman in the tea house at home. Wang Lung's act of bringing Lotus as a concubine is suggestive of the custom of keeping numerous concubines in feudal China. Having concubines was taken as a symbol of wealth of status in a Confucian society. (Hays, 2008) In the same manner, Wang Lung takes pride in buying Lotus Flower as a concubine. He said, "And it was a pride to Wang Lung in the village that men mentioned with envy the woman in his inner court..." (The Good Earth, p.154) Wang Lung even asks for the two pearls from O-lan for giving it to Lotus by saying "why should one wear pearls with her skin as black as earth? Pearls are for fair women." (The Good Earth, p.134) Wang Lung kept Lotus as his toy and to satisfy his delight in beauty and O-lan for his woman of world and the mother who had borne his sons and fed him, his father and his children.

Though O-lan's image as a 'submissive housewife', 'kitchen slave', 'bearer of children' is emerged throughout the novel 'The Good Earth', she also represents the whole crew of Chinese women in case of hardworking, intelligent, competent and bold woman. There are many instances in 'the novel where O-lan displays her competency. During Famine when there was nothing left to eat, Wang's father suggested to kill an Ox. But Wang Lung dared not to do so. At that time, O-lan crept out and took a great iron knife and cut a great gush in the beast's neck. Wang Lung and O-lan were working together in the field cutting the sheaves. She stopped and on her face was the sweat of a new agony. She said, "It is come. I will go into the house. Only bring me a newly peeled reed and slit it that I may cut the child's life from mine." She gave birth to a child herself enduring pains without anyone's help. It shows the boldness of Chinese woman.

There are also some instances where O-lan shocked Wang Lung and even the readers with her practical sense. When Wang Lung's uncle and the land brokers tempt Wang to sell his land during famine, O-lan appeared on the scene and makes us acquaint with her visionary sense. She said to them, "The land we will not sell surely." Instead she suggested

the middle way – to sell the furniture and go to south to survive.

When they went to the south, O-lan taught her children and the old man how to beg to survive in such hard time. When asked by Wang Lung where had she learned this art? O-lan answered,

“So I called when I was a child and so I was fed. In such a year as this I was sold as a slave.”

Wang Lung's uncle's wife and Cuckoo both are seen as shrewd and selfish kind of women. When Wang Lung asked her to settle his affair with Lotus, his aunt told him about Cuckoo, the keeper of Lotus, “That one! But it is a simple matter, indeed. Everything is plain. That one! From the begging that one would do anything even to making a mountain if she could feel silver enough in her palm for it.” (The Good Earth, p.138) His aunt is also a master in arranging affairs. When Wang Lung asks her to arrange matter with Lotus, she says, “Is this the first time I have managed a man and a maid? Leave me alone and I will do it.” (The Good Earth, p.139) Wang Lung also accepts the fact that his aunt is a deceitful and untrustworthy creature.

Lotus also represents all greedy and pleasure seeking Chinese women who use their beauty to lead a comfortable life. When she came to know that Wang Lung has fallen on her, Lotus asked for expensive jewellery and clothes and silver coins. Lotus is also lacking maternal instinct. It can be perceptible when she complains and calls his children ‘idiots’ and warns Wang Lung that they should not be entered into her apartment.

CONCLUSIONS

There has been an influence of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Feudalism on Chinese culture as a whole. Especially, Confucianism has been considered as the chief moral codifier of women in Chinese society up to the early 20th c. It affects a lot to every sphere – social, political, economic fields in China. These philosophies construct rigid traditions and customs governing the lives of women in which women were supposed to live in specific boundaries. Many evils such as slavery, female infanticide, selling of girl child, foot binding, women as sex objects etc. can be perceptible in Chinese society. Pearl S. Buck's major novels based on China show her keen observation of Chinese society during 19th and early 20th C. She is successful enough in bringing out rigid traditions in all her major works. In ‘The Good Earth’, Buck succeeds in bringing out the multifarious images of women such as ‘Kitchen slave’, ‘sex object’, submissive housewife’, ‘bold and hard working’, ‘selfish and pleasure seeking’ etc. through her women characters like O-lan, Wang Lung's aunt, Lotus Flower, Cuckoo. So, It elaborates the prevailing social traditions and its impact on women and the Chinese society as a whole in a best manner. I am sure that this study will definitely be helpful to all researchers for multi cultural study as well as comparative study.

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